

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – August 10, 2026**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on Monday, August 10, 2026, in the Commissioners' Board Room, 69 N. Main Street, Marion, NC.

Members Present

Chairman, Tony Brown; Vice-Chair, Lynn Greene; Patrick Ellis; and Trisha Garner, David Walker

Members Absent

None

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Madalyn Robinson, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney;

Call to Order

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm. Commissioner Ellis led the group in prayer. Commissioner Garner led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Walker moved to approve the July 13, 2026 regular session minutes and the July 24, 2026 special session minutes, with a second from Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Approval of Agenda

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the agenda, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Transit Approvals and Updates

Transit Director, Jason Hollifield, gave an update on the Transit Department and provided information regarding the funding request. Mr. Hollifield presented on the FY 2028 federal funding approval request. The administrative amount that the state has approved is \$210,534 with a 15% County match of \$31,580. One of the Transit vans is due to be replaced, which is the combined capital of \$110,000. The van will be a wheelchair van that is ADA compliant. The addition would bring the total vehicles from eleven to thirteen. With the expansion vans totaling \$220,000, the County match would be 20%, totaling \$44,000. The local share for the FY 2028 funding request is \$86,580. This is slightly higher than in prior years due to the inclusion of \$44,000 that would be used for acquiring additional vans. Vice-Chair Greene asked if the \$540,000 total included state and federal funds and clarified that the local match is less than \$90,000. Mr. Hollifield confirmed the information was correct. Vice-Chair Greene moved to approve the request, seconded by Commissioner Walker.

Commissioner Ellis moved to go into public hearing, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 5-0, Chairman Brown declared the public hearing at 5:06 pm. There were no comments from the public. Commissioner Ellis made a motion to go out of public hearing, seconded by Vice-Chair Greene. Vice-Chair Greene made a motion to approve the funding request, seconded by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Hollifield moved on to presenting the proposed change to the no-show policy. No-shows continue to be a problem for the Transit Department, and similar issues are apparent in other Counties. The Transit Department has roughly twenty-five no-shows a week. This issue was brought before the Transportation Advisory Board, and the Board recommended a no-show penalty. The policy adjustment would require persons requesting to be reinstated after being prohibited from riding due to violation of the no-show policy to pay a \$10 reinstatement fee. This policy does not include Medicare or Medicaid clients. Commissioner Walker asked if this was standard operating procedure for other counties surrounding McDowell, and Mr. Hollifield confirmed that Yancey and Mitchell counties enforce policies like this. Commissioner Walker moved to approve the request as presented, with a second from Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Hollifield presented an update to the Alcohol and Drug Policy for Transit Agencies enforced by the Federal government. The policy remains a zero-tolerance policy but includes updated verbiage from the federal government that Transit agencies are required to include. Commissioner Walker moved to approve the request as presented, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Hollifield presented MEE data provided by the Department of Transportation in reference to the Express Program. Mr. Hollifield highlighted the steady growth for public transit to the Board and thanked the Board for their support. The Board thanked Mr. Hollifield for the outstanding job he does for the Transit Department.

Planning Department Updates

Ron Harmon, Planning Director, gave updates on the Planning Department and presented three items to the Board. The Historic Carson House has requested that the County reactivate the Historic Preservation Commission so that that organization and others would be eligible for various state and federal grants. The Historic Preservation Commission was previously paused due to lack of staff who could work as the Commission liaison. The recommendation is that the Commission membership be dropped from 7 to 5 members to more easily achieve a quorum. Staff from the Planning Department will aid in the reactivation of the Commission. Commissioner Walker moved to approve the request to activate the Historic Preservation Commission, with a second from Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Harmon presented the draft RV Park Ordinance. Several months ago, you received a draft RV Park Ordinance. The Board sent back the draft to the Planning Board and asked that they hold meetings with those who operate RV parks. These meetings have been held, and several changes have been made to the draft. Mr. Harmon requested that the Board review the draft and set a public hearing for the ordinance to be adopted at a later date.

Mr. Harmon presented the last item regarding data centers. Last month the Board directed that the Planning Board evaluate whether regulating data centers should be considered. The Planning Board's preference would be to ban them outright, but since that is not possible, Mr. Harmon recommended a moratorium. If the Board is agreeable to regulating them, a public hearing would need to be scheduled. Commissioner Walker moved to hold a public hearing on August 31st at 5 pm to hear concerns regarding the moratorium on data centers. Commissioner Garner seconded the motion. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Tax Settlement and Order of Collection

Linda Onufrey, Tax Collector, presented the 2025-2026 fiscal tax settlement for 2025 McDowell County property taxes and district taxes. Ms. Onufrey also presented a single-bound copy of the unpaid 2025 taxes on real and personal property at the close of the 2025-2026 fiscal year. The overall collection rate for 2025 County ad valorem taxes for the 2025-2026 fiscal year was 99.47%, which is a slight decrease from last year (99.55%). Delinquent (prior years) tax collections for the 2025-2026 fiscal year totaled \$154,067.81. With a tax levy that increased by approximately \$790,000 from the previous year, staff achieved a 99.47% (representing real and personal property) collection rate of the \$34.4 million levy. Ms. Onufrey asked the Board if they had any questions regarding the information presented.

Commissioner Walker stated that having the small amount unpaid out of the tax levy to start with was impressive. Commissioner Garner thanked Ms. Onufrey and her

staff. Commissioner Walker made a motion for the settlement and order of collections, seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Sales Tax Referendum

Mr. Wooten presented the sales tax referendum allocating funding to the school system, college, and County. The Board directed staff last month to bring back a recommended breakdown of potential proceeds from the sales tax referendum that is planned for November 3rd. If enacted, the additional ¼ cent sales tax is projected to generate approximately \$1.5 million based on current spending trends. The Board indicated that they would reduce a future property tax levy by the equivalent of one penny on the current property tax rate, which is approximately \$650,000. The net gain would be approximately \$850,000 based on current revenues. The direction was to recommend how to break down the net proceeds between the County, the School System, and the College. The scenarios presented by Mr. Wooten factor in the \$650,000 property tax trade-off being accounted for already. A percentage breakdown is suggested as follows:

County: 50%
Schools: 35%
College: 15%

The dollar breakdown based on the above percentage-based scenario:

County: \$425,000 (50%)
Schools: \$297,500 (35%)
College: \$127,500 (15%)

The financial needs of the School System are greater than the College, resulting in the funding disparity. Here is another scenario if you would prefer the County to retain a greater share:

County: \$510,000 (60%)
Schools: \$255,000 (30%)
College: \$85,000 (10%)

Mr. Wooten added that no action needs to be taken; these were presented for the Board to look over. Commissioner Walker asked about Dr. Grits' letter to the Board including the wealth formula. Mr. Wooten stated that Dr. Grit has communicated concern about lowering the tax rate and how this could affect the low wealth funding formula. The state of North Carolina penalizes counties when they do not show a certain effort in property tax collection. The reasoning behind this is if taxes remain low in McDowell, the Department of Public Instruction concludes that the County is not trying to the best of their ability to carry the burden of funding the local public-school system. The formula used assesses peer County groups, and if those Counties have a higher tax rate, the County is essentially penalized for trying to give taxpayers a lower rate. Mr. Wooten

added that discussions with the public schools need to continue to assess the uncertainties and unknowns surrounding this matter.

Vice-Chair Greene asked how the declining enrollment affects the funding amount for the public schools. They receive a per-pupil allocation for average daily membership. When children move out of the County, are homeschooled, or attend private schools, those funds follow the child. With enrollment declining, there are fixed costs that cannot be eliminated, and this poses some challenges. With no other comments or questions, the Board moved on to the next topic of discussion.

Helene Recovery Updates

Mr. Wooten presented the Helene Recovery update to the Board. Helene recovery activities continue for homeowners and for County projects. several CDBG-DR applications are planned for submission, including the 911 Center relocation, a new animal shelter, and an expansion of the Old Fort Senior Center. Those applications, which are being completed by the Foothills Regional Commission, are due by September 8. Grant announcements would not happen until November or December. Emergency Services staff have drafted a report to provide an update on the status of different aspects of recovery.

Category E – Buildings, Equipment & Infrastructure

- EMS Headquarters
- EMS Station 2
- Grants Tower Fencing
- Dysartsville Convenience Center Fencing
- County vehicles and equipment
- Status: These projects have all been completed. Repairs are being funded through a combination of FEMA reimbursement and insurance.

McDowell House:

- Initial emergency stabilization and cleanup activities following Hurricane Helene were completed.
- An assessment of the storm-related damages has been completed and will help guide the permanent repair strategy.
- We are still working to determine the most appropriate long-term approach for restoring the facility
- Additional updates will be provided

Category G – Parks Projects

Completed or Nearing Completion:

- Spaulding Trail
- Maple Leaf Park
- Hemphill Park

- Parks & Recreation erosion repairs
- Black Bear Park

Status: These projects have been completed or are substantially complete. Repairs are being funded through FEMA, insurance, and other grant opportunities. While some FEMA reimbursements are still being processed, funding for these projects has been approved.

Sandy Andrews Park

- The engineering Scope of work has been completed and approved by FEMA.
- FEMA funding will cover eligible repairs resulting from Hurricane Helene.
- Additional mitigation measures are being pursued through FEMA to help reduce future flood damage.
- A few final items remain before the project can move into the next engineering phases for construction.

Lindley Park

- The engineering scope of work has been completed and approved by FEMA.
- FEMA funding will cover eligible repairs resulting from Hurricane Helene.
- Additional mitigation measures are being pursued through FEMA to help reduce future flood damage.
- This project is ready to progress through the next phases needed to begin repairs.

Greenlee Park

- The engineering scope of work has been approved by FEMA.
- FEMA funding and insurance will cover eligible repairs resulting from Hurricane Helene.
- Additional mitigation measures are being pursued through FEMA to help reduce future flood damage.
- The project has moved into the remaining engineering and project development phases before construction can begin.

What's Next:

- Complete the remaining FEMA approvals and engineering phases needed to begin construction on the remaining park projects.
- Continue pursuing mitigation through FEMA.

Some Hurricane Helene damages are not included in this update because they were fully covered by insurance and, therefore, were not processed as FEMA projects. Some approved reimbursements are still being processed for release from the state to McDowell County.

Commissioner Ellis asked for completion dates for the bridges in Curtis Creek and Old Fort when available. Mr. Wooten plans to communicate with DOT about this. Vice-Chair Greene and Commissioner Garner thanked Mr. Kehler and County staff for their work through Helene recovery and navigating these challenges. There has been a lot of progress made and a lot more that needs to be done but Vice-Chair Greene appreciates what has been done by County staff to help the community. Commissioner Garner added her thanks to Mr. Kehler, Ms. Jones, and all of the department heads working through the challenges surrounding Helene recovery.

County Operational Evaluation Updates

Mr. Wooten gave an update on the County Operational Evaluation process. Last month, the Board authorized the initiation of a County Operations Evaluation Process. The goal of this process is to look at operational efficiencies in the following areas:

- Contracted services vs. utilization of County staff
- Evaluating County benefit programs such as the self-insurance plan
- Identifying surplus real and personal property
- Evaluating energy efficiency improvements
- A few items of progress can be reported.

Staff has contacted the NCACC Strategic Coordinator Program staff regarding the effort. They are assembling a team of coordinators that will assist. They will first look at the property holdings and will work with staff on any recommended changes of utilization or retention. Staff has begun evaluating utility bills starting with the energy providers. Some potential savings have been identified already due to some double billing regarding utilities. On the operational side, Parks and Recreation staff are looking at operations at their facilities and will return later in the fall with some recommendations on possible adjustments.

County Water System Updates

Mr. Wooten provided an update on the County Water Systems. Water Purchase Agreement Staff has met with representatives from the Town and City on the proposed interconnect between Old Fort and Marion's water systems. The first step in determining if the project is feasible is to complete a surface water blending study. A proposal from an engineering firm is expected soon. Commissioner Walker asked for the timeline for hearing back from the engineering firm, and Mr. Wooten stated that this would be roughly 60 days. Thirty days of sampling from both systems would be needed to assess the feasibility. Testing can be done with local staff to cut down on costs.

Nebo:

- The East End Project is wrapping up, with just a few customers yet to be connected.

- The small extension project near Exit 90 is more or less ready to bid. The grant consultant states that they believe all of the environmental reviews are complete.
- Phase 3 (Randolph Road) started construction on August 5.
- A grant/small loan combination was received for the construction of a water storage tank somewhere on the Nebo system. An RFQ for engineering services has been drafted and is being advertised.

Providence Area/West Marion Elementary Area:

- The engineer has provided the 90% plans to staff for review. The section to the school and the loop on Marler and Zion Hill have been combined by the state into one project.
- The environmental review package is being submitted to NCDEQ this month for their review.

Asset Inventory and Assessment Project:

- The Asset Inventory and Assessment Project is now underway.
- The first steps involve doing a complete inventory of the County's water assets and updating the mapping. The GIS mapping process is nearing completion.

Vice- Chair Greene asked about funding for the projects. The Nebo projects are primarily being funded by the County's \$11 million state appropriation as well as separate project-related grants. The Providence Area/West Marion Elementary Area projects are being funded by a State appropriation, Appalachian Regional Commission funds, and Board of Education funds. The AIA grant is being paid for with \$400,000 in NCDEQ funds. The partnership project is being paid for with a \$ 100,000 NCDEQ grant.

NCACC Legislative Goal Setting

Mr. Wooten presented the NCACC Legislative Goal Setting item, where counties submit goals for the 2027 legislative session having a statewide impact. The purpose of the goal setting is to develop the advocacy program for the association. The Board has previously discussed several items of legislative interest, including increasing the income limit for elderly and disabled property tax exemptions. The Board has previously asked for assistance with school funding to reduce the local burden, and Mr. Wooten asked the Board if they were agreeable to the two goals. The Board agreed to add the two items discussed and requested time to think this over. The discussion regarding the legislative goals will be addressed at the August 17th meeting.

Budget Updates and Approvals

Mr. Wooten presented the budget updates and approvals to the Board. There was one project budget ordinance for the transfer station improvement project and four budget amendments for FY 2027:

- GF 3: Appropriates reserved funds (Duke Energy insurance proceeds and donations) for Emergency Services generator/equipment costs.
- GF 4: Allocates additional revenue due to a change order for the Transfer Station Renovations/Repairs project
- GF 5: Records the expense and receipt of projected sales tax revenue
- SP 1: Amends the School Project Fund to appropriate funds transferred from reserves for HVAC Systems #90

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the five items as presented, seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Administrative Items

Mr. Wooten presented the administrative items to the Board for approval. The EMS Transport Write-offs total \$33,412.68 in fees requested to be released, and a Leak Write-off for \$99.07. Vice-Chair Greene moved to approve the items as presented, with a second from Commissioner Ellis. The motion passed 5-0.

Property Tax Releases, Refunds, and Discoveries

Mr. Wooten presented the property tax releases, refunds, and discoveries to the Board for approval. Mr. Wooten noted that this month includes property tax commission (PCT), which is different than the traditional releases presented monthly.

PTC Releases: \$2,609.82

PTC Refunds: \$2,805.52

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the property tax releases as presented, seconded by Commissioner Garner. The motion passed 5-0.

Releases Over \$100: \$132.80

Releases Under \$100: \$0

Refunds: \$0

Motor Vehicle Refunds: \$1,751.70

Discoveries: \$0

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the refunds and discoveries as presented, seconded by Vice-Chair Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Commissioner Committee and Board Appointments

The Clerk to the Board presented the Commissioner committee and board appointments for approval. Brenda Vaughn applied to be reappointed to the Planning Board due to her term limit expiring, and Doug Gallion applied to fill the empty seat on the Focal Point Advisory Board.

Commissioner Ellis moved to approve both applicants to the respective boards, with a second from Vice-Chair Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Citizen Comment

Four people signed up for citizen comment. Jeff Duncan on solid waste fee, Nikki Buchanan on Budget and Solid Waste Fee, Mike Cinguanto on Data Centers, and Melissa Biddix on Data Centers.

Commissioner Staff/Reports and Communication

None

Closed Session

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to go into closed session at 6:05 pm, seconded by Vice-Chair Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to come out of closed session at 8:16 pm, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Adjournment

Commissioner Walker made a motion to adjourn at 8:16 pm, seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.